

Tensions Flare Over Women's Prayers at Sacred Western Wall

The ultra-Orthodox rabbi in charge of the sacred Western Wall assured a government emissary on Thursday that Jewish women will not be arrested if they try to recite the mourner's prayer at the holy site, despite a warning from Israeli police.

Tensions have grown between traditional Jews and reform-minded women over prayers at the Western Wall, which contains the remains of the Temple that was destroyed nearly 2,000 years ago.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has tapped Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency, with defusing the conflict and ensuring "that every Jew in the world can pray in the manner that they are accustomed to at Judaism's most important national and religious site," according to a statement issued by the Jewish Agency.

Sharansky met with Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the caretaker of the Western Wall, on Thursday, three weeks after the Israeli police told the Women of the Wall prayer group that their recitation of the Kaddish mourner's prayer at the site would be grounds for arrest.

The Kaddish mourner's prayer is the newest flashpoint in the ongoing dispute; ultra-Orthodox Jews say women should not sing or pray aloud in public because their voices are provocative to men. Because the mourner's prayer traditionally is recited only when a quorum of 10 men is present, a group of women reciting the prayer in public is doubly offensive to traditionalists.

Sharansky went into the meeting “to express his shock” at the March 14 police letter, but “Rabbi Rabinowitz assured Sharansky that, contrary to the letter, no woman would be arrested for reciting Kaddish at the Western Wall,” the agency statement said.

Rabinowitz could not be reached for comment.

Members of Women of the Wall, a group of Reform, Conservative and modern-Orthodox women, have been praying at the Western Wall for more than two decades despite objections from the ultra-Orthodox religious establishment, which has attempted to put further restrictions on the women’s prayer options.

In recent months the police have detained several WOW members and their supporters for wearing prayer shawls and bringing in a Torah scroll to the women’s section—both banned by a 2005 High Court ruling that mandated the status quo at the holy site.

The women’s group holds monthly prayer services at the site, and in March three female Israeli parliamentarians, dressed in prayer shawls, joined the group. The presence of the lawmakers deterred the police from detaining any of the 300 worshippers.

Anat Hoffman, WOW’s chairwoman, said that “prohibiting women from saying Kaddish is a shanda,” using the Yiddish term for a shameful thing, and said Rabinowitz “has, without a doubt, crossed a clear red line, as women’s right to say Kaddish is respected and accepted by the entire Jewish world, including Orthodox factions.”

Elana Sztokman, executive director of the New York-based Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, said “it is not up to the state of Israel, the police, or the (Wall’s) administrator,” to dictate when women can say the Kaddish.

“The idea that the police are being recruited to incarcerate women for failing to comply with the particularly radical

opinion of the ultra-Orthodox rabbi ... is a frightening invasion of fanatic religious opinions into women's real lives," she said.